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ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM OF ZOOLOGY

TORONTO

LEAFLET No. 2

TWELVE CANADIAN BIRDS

A pamphlet to accompany a series of reproductions of twelve paintings of Canadian birds by Allan Brooks. The original paintings are part of the Wallace Havelock Robb collection in the Museum.

Horned Grebe, *Colymbus auritus*. In its summer plumage this handsome diver is best known in the prairie provinces where it nests about the sloughs and ponds. In the east it may be found in spring in some numbers on our lakes and ponds and in autumn it remains with us, in the Great Lakes region, until ice covers the feeding areas, at which time it departs for the south. In autumn and winter the species is much more modestly attired, being dark grey above and silvery white below.

Like all the other members of the order (Pygopodes), the horned grebe is an expert diver. In fact, it is so highly specialized for swimming and diving as to be almost helpless on solid surfaces, such as the ground or ice and, except in rare instances, can take wing only from the water.

The grebe prefers fairly shallow water where it feeds on aquatic animals of little or no economic importance. It is not regarded as a game bird and is rarely used as food.

Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*. The herring gull is the common "sea gull" of our inland lakes. It is found over practically all of Canada, especially in the vicinity of lakes and along the coasts. In winter it leaves the icebound interior lakes and congregates on the lower Great Lakes and along the sea coasts in considerable numbers. Its large size, pearl-grey back and black wing-tips will serve to distinguish the adults from most of the other gulls with which it is associated, but under certain conditions identification is often difficult.

This gull is usually associated in our minds with holiday trips to northern lakes. Here it is seen following boats or beating up and down the shore, constantly searching for bits of food,

whether it be fish, its natural food, or scraps from our lunch box.

These birds usually colonize for nesting, selecting some bare rock-island or cliff where they are safe from enemies and within easy reach of their food supply. A nest of coarse vegetation is built to contain the two or three eggs which are greyish or olive, and variously marked with dark brown. The young remain near the nest for several weeks before they are ready to fly, after which they may be recognized by their dark, grey-brown plumage which is quite unlike that of the adult. Young birds in this plumage are usually found in the flocks of herring gulls frequenting the shores of the sea and the Great Lakes in winter.

The herring gull is beneficial to man since it is a scavenger. Dead fish and similar waste materials washed ashore form an important proportion of its food.

Like the herring gull, the **Common Tern**, *Sterna hirundo*, which is also shown in the picture, is a bird of open water and may be found in the northern parts of both the new and the old world. In the field it is difficult to distinguish this tern from two closely allied species. Terns in general are notable for their graceful flight. With down-pointing bill they patrol near the shores in search of food, now and then hovering on beating wings to examine promising waters.

Great Blue Heron, *Ardea h. herodias*. This bird is often called "Crane", but it is quite unlike the cranes, being a true heron in structure and habits. It is one of our largest birds, standing more than four feet in height. Although its general proportions may seem to give it an awkward appearance, no bird is more picturesque when seen in a suitable setting. During the seasons of the year when our lakes, bays and rivers are free of ice the heron is to be found over nearly the whole of Canada. It may be seen standing motionless in shallow water, waiting for its prey, or making its way overhead with slow wing beats, the neck folded back, and the long legs outstretched behind.

The great blue heron nests in colonies, usually in trees in wet, swampy woods. The nest itself is a huge one, and a collection of them such as is sometimes found in a heronry is a striking landmark. The few heronries that still exist should be afforded every protection as it would be a great loss if this picturesque bird were to disappear from our land.

Its food consists of frogs, snakes, and small fishes, principally those of no economic importance.

Mourning Dove, *Zenaidura macroura carolinensis*. The mourning dove is of special interest to those who would know our native birds, since it is the species most frequently mistaken for the passenger pigeon, a bird formerly abundant in eastern North America, but now considered extinct. The dove's plumage is compact, the colour a delicate blend of grey, brown and buff, tinged with wine-colour. If one looks closely a reflection of red-purple and brass will be seen on the neck. The call of the dove is a soft, low-pitched cooing, perhaps the lowest pitched of all our bird songs, rather mournful and ventriloquistic in effect, often mistaken by persons unfamiliar with birds for the call of an owl.

In Canada the mourning dove is found largely in southern sections, where it nests. It assembles in flocks in late summer and in late October migrates to the southern part of the continent, returning in early April. Farm-land constitutes its principal habitat and evergreen trees, especially those transplanted as shelter-groves about farm buildings, are resorted to for nesting. Many other kinds of trees and vines, however, are used as nesting sites, and occasionally the nest is placed on the ground.

The nesting habits of the mourning dove are of particular interest. As a general rule birds which produce helpless young construct strong, compact nests. The dove, however, builds a mere platform of small sticks, so loosely and openly woven as to allow one to see the two white eggs when the nest is viewed from below. The young are brooded for a time, being fed with a regurgitated secretion, together with macerated seeds from the crops of the old birds. Later they are fed on seeds which they obtain from the throat of the parent after it has been cast up from the crop.

The species is decidedly beneficial to man since its food consists of waste grain and the seeds of plants usually considered as weeds. The crop of a single bird may contain as many as ten thousand small weed seeds.

Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*. This picturesque hawk is found in Europe, Asia and Africa as well as in North America. It may be recognized by its large size, its dusky back, and white underparts and its characteristic high-pitched notes which at a distance suggest the complaining calls of young chickens.

Its food consists entirely of fish which it catches by making a spectacular spiral dive from a considerable elevation. - It strikes the water feet first with wings raised high over its back



and if it has been successful in catching a fish, bears it away clutched in its talons. It is equipped for holding its slippery prey not only by the possession of sharp, strongly curved claws or talons, but in having the soles of its feet roughened by many horny points.

The osprey usually nests only in the wilder sections of the country. Ordinarily the nest is placed on the broken top of a standing tree, and as it is used year after year, additions being made to it from time to time, it frequently attains huge dimensions and becomes a conspicuous feature of the landscape. In communities fortunate enough to have a pair of nesting ospreys, their nests should be protected.

The osprey does most of its fishing in shallow water and the fish it catches are of little or no value.

Downy Woodpecker, *Dryobates pubescens medianus*. This diminutive black-and-white woodpecker is widely distributed, being found over most of North America. It is with us in southern Canada in winter as well as in summer. The sexes are distinguishable even by the casual observer since the male only possesses the patch of red feathers at the back of the head.

The limb of an apple tree near a dwelling or the trunk of a paper birch far from settlement serve it equally well as a home. A cavity is drilled into the soft wood by means of the chisel-like bill and four to six glossy white eggs are deposited on the chip-covered bottom.

The food habits of this species like that of most woodpeckers make it extremely beneficial to man. By means of their sharp bills they probe into insect-infected trees and with their sharp, horny tongues extricate grubs from the wood. They are enabled to do this because of the backward-pointing barbs along the side of the tongue. This species and its relatives thus help to keep in check many pests of fruit and forest trees.

This interesting little bird may be attracted about your home in winter by hanging suet in trees for he is very fond of such a diet.

Nighthawk, *Chordeiles v. virginianus*. The nighthawk is found in settled and unsettled districts alike. Various names such as "bull-bat" and "mosquito-hawk" have been applied to this bird. It is, of course, not a hawk but belongs to the family of goat-suckers to which group also belong the whip-poor-will and European nightjar. Because its food consists entirely of insects it is one of our most desirable birds.

The nighthawk is most active in the evening and its peculiar buzzing vocal notes and the "zooming" sound made by the vibration of its wing-feathers as it checks its earthward swoops are characteristic sounds of the species. During the greater part of the day-time, except when hungry nestlings demand food, the birds rest motionless on the ground, flushing only when suddenly disturbed.

No nest is built, the eggs being placed in a simple hollow on flat, gravel roofs in cities and on the ground in open places in rural districts. The eggs, which are two in number, are white, closely speckled with grey-brown.

Kingbird, *Tyrannus tyrannus*. The name of this bird is quite fitting since it maintains a domain of territory surrounding its nesting site, giving chase to intruding hawks and crows, but tolerating lesser kinds. It may also be said to wear a crown, a concealed patch of brilliant orange-red feathers, which it rarely displays.

It is commonly found along our country roads and about farmsteads. It also occurs, but more rarely, in the clearings of the wilder parts of the north. Seated upon a fence or telephone wire, the kingbird suddenly flutters out after a flying insect, snaps it up with its bill and returns to its perch. Its vocal efforts are not particularly musical since they are hardly more than a series of sputtering, buzzing utterances.

Its bulky nest is frequently placed in orchard trees, although in wilder sections it seems to have a preference for dead trees overhanging the water.

The kingbird feeds largely on insects and is consequently one of the birds that it is desirable to protect and encourage.

Purple Finch, *Carpodacus p. purpureus*. The term "purple" is scarcely an accurate description of the colour of this species. The male which is more brightly coloured than the female is really of a subdued red which, however, appears more brilliant when viewed in the proper light. The female is grey and brown, various shades of these tones being arranged in a streaked pattern.

Along the southern borders of Canada, the purple finch is known principally as a winter resident. Small flocks travel here and there over the snow-covered landscape, stopping to feed on the winter buds of trees and to salvage the withered, frozen fruit of wild and domestic trees and shrubs. Food stations such

as many people maintain to attract winter birds are frequently visited by purple finches.

It occurs in summer throughout our northern forests. At this season the male is one of our most noteworthy songsters. High up in the spiral peak of some coniferous tree a dainty nest containing from four to six bluish eggs, marked with brown may be located, but one must study long before it can be perceived from the ground.

Although it has been thought that the purple finch may injure certain trees by feeding on the winter buds, it has not been proved that it does any serious damage. The bird is largely harmless and its beauty renders it decidedly attractive to those who appreciate nature.

Cliff Swallow, *Petrochelidon lunifrons*, and **Barn Swallow**, *Hirundo erythrogaster*. Both of these species are widely distributed in North America, but the cliff swallow is rare as compared with the barn swallow. It will be noticed that the tail of the cliff swallow is almost square at the end whereas the tail of the barn swallow is forked. Also the forehead of the former is whitish and the rump rufous while the latter is marked with darker colours in these areas.

Both of these swallows illustrate the adaptability displayed by some birds to a changing environment. Formerly they nested against the faces of cliffs or caves, but with the settlement of the continent new situations such as are provided by buildings suited their purpose. Now it is usual to find the barn swallow forming its mud nests against beams within farm buildings, and if the cliff swallow is found in the same region, it too may build its bottle-necked, mud nest against the same building, but outside, beneath the eaves. Away from civilization, particularly in the prairie provinces, the cliff swallow still uses the faces of rock and clay cliffs for nesting. These birds lay from four to six eggs which are white, marked with brown.

Swallows are masters of flight, catching their insect food while on the wing. They are thus useful as well as extremely interesting and attractive birds.

Redstart, *Setophaga ruticilla*. In many species of birds the two sexes are strikingly unlike in coloration. This is well illustrated in the case of the redstart in which the male's plumage of black, orange and white is in strong contrast to that of the female, which is greenish-grey, dull yellow and whitish-grey.

The redstart is found throughout North America, nesting in our mixed and evergreen forests. The nest is usually placed in a crotch near the trunk of a small or medium sized tree, birches being frequently chosen. Four or five whitish eggs, spotted with brown are deposited in the cup-shaped nest.

The redstart is a warbler and in common with other members of the warbler family eats insects. However, its method of capturing its prey is more like that of a flycatcher, in that it pursues and catches in the air insects flying about the tree or shrub in which it is feeding.

House Wren, *Troglodytes a. aedon* and Winter Wren, *Nannus h. hiemalis*. Consideration of these two birds will illustrate how closely related species differ in appearance and habit while possessing certain general similarities. They have a general similarity of coloration, but the house wren has less cinnamon brown above and is lighter below. Both have short tails, but the tail of the house wren is not so short as that of the winter wren. Again both have bubbling, spirited songs. The house wren's song is rather brief, though often repeated and may be considered as having a theme. The song of the winter wren is an extended, rippling medley of musical chirps and trills. He is a virtuoso who cannot sing a tune.

Both species range widely over North America, but the house wren is to be found nesting farther south than the winter wren. One of the most striking differences between them is in the particular type of habitat which they frequent for nesting. The house wren chooses nooks about buildings, bird-houses and cavities in stumps in open, light situations while the winter wren builds its nest among the up-turned roots of fallen trees in dark, damp ravines or swampy tangles of our northern forests. Although this wren is found in winter in rather northerly latitudes as compared with other species, it rarely winters as far north as Ontario. Its name, therefore, is not particularly appropriate here. Both of these wrens lay from five to eight eggs marked with reddish brown, those of the house wren being more densely marked.

Minute insects comprise their food, the house wren attacking those of the garden and orchard, and the winter wren those of the forest.

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The Museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. all week-days except Christmas Day and the morning of New Year's Day. It is also open Sunday from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Admission is free Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, and on all public holidays. On other days the admission fee is fifteen cents.

University students are admitted without charge on presentation of their registration cards.

All classes from the schools, art students, and study groups are admitted free.

